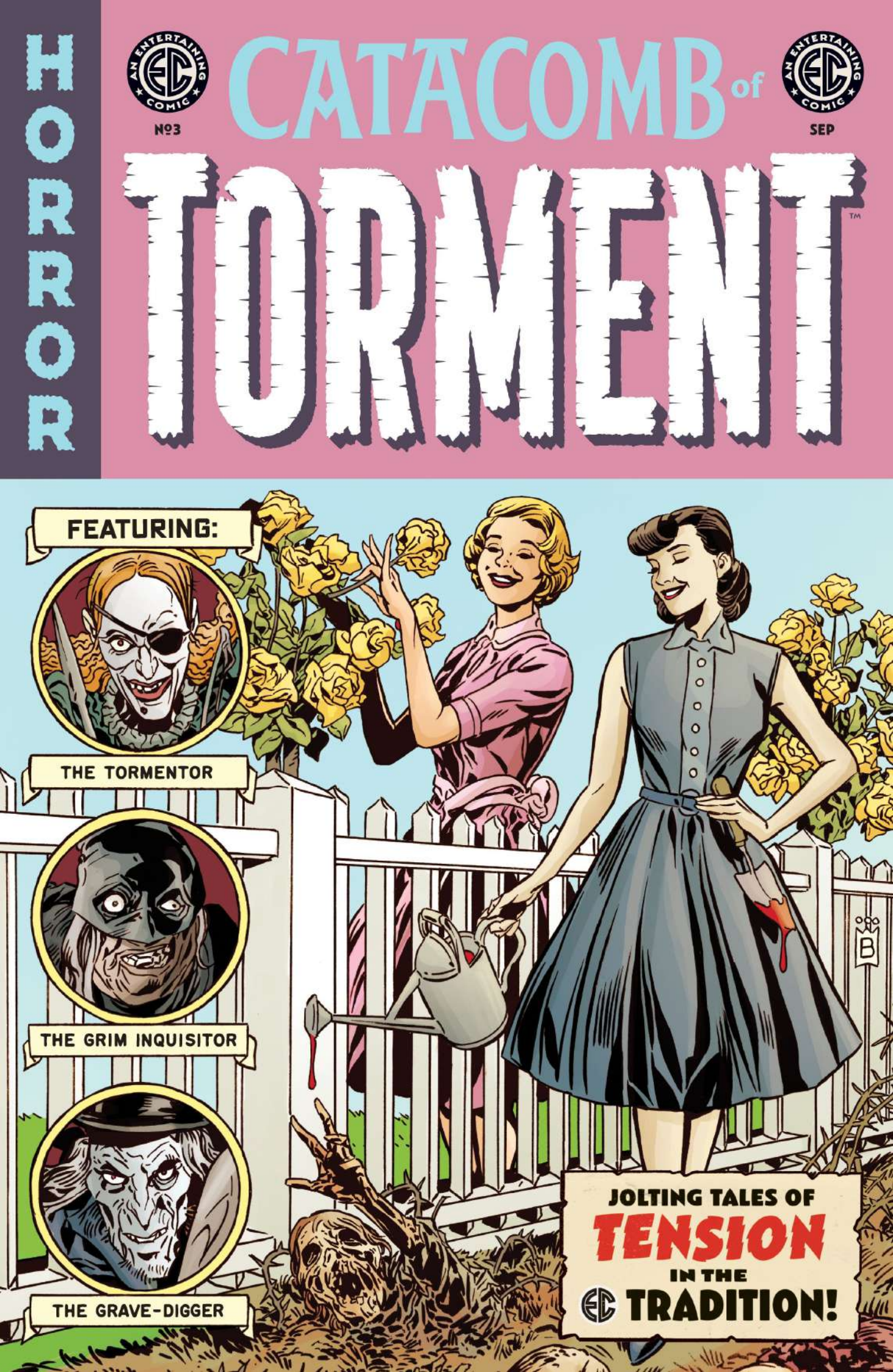
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THE GRIM INQUISITOR
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JOLTING TALES OF
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CATACOMB OF TORMENT №3

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Catacomb of Torment #3
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Oni-Lion Forge Publishing Group, LLC.
1319 SE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd, Ste 216
Portland, OR 97214

onipress.com

Cover A by
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Archive Edition Variant by
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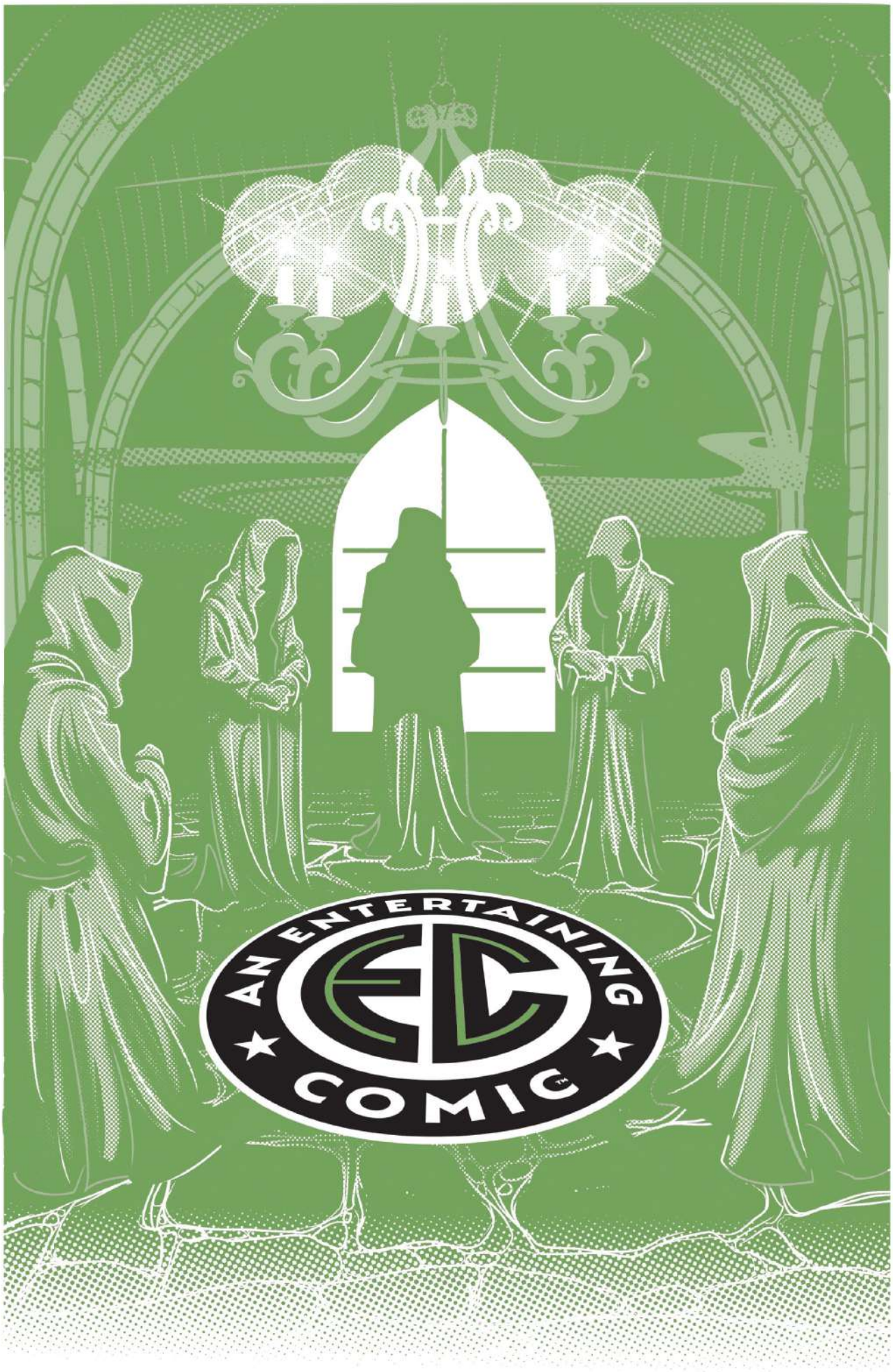
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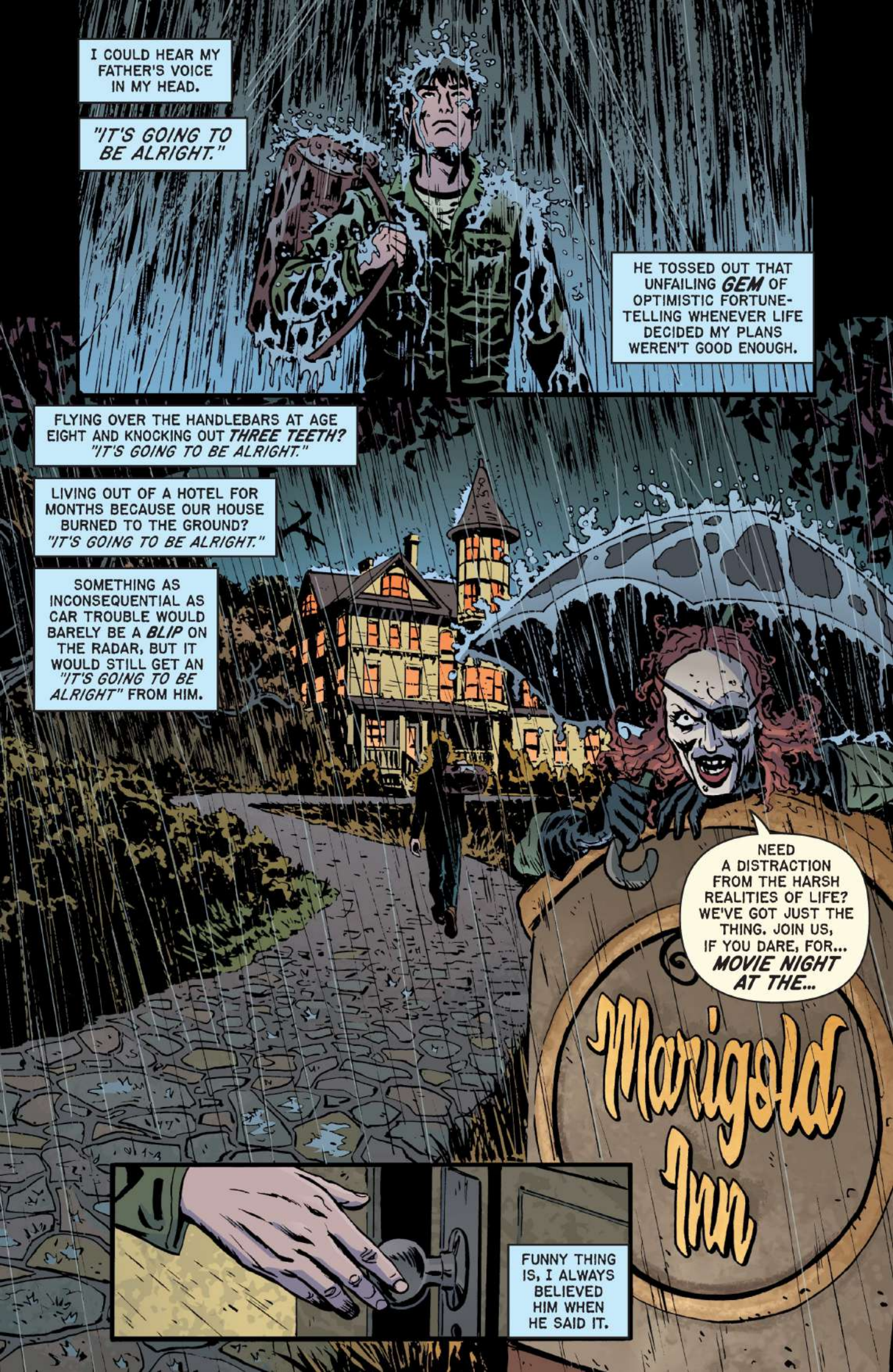
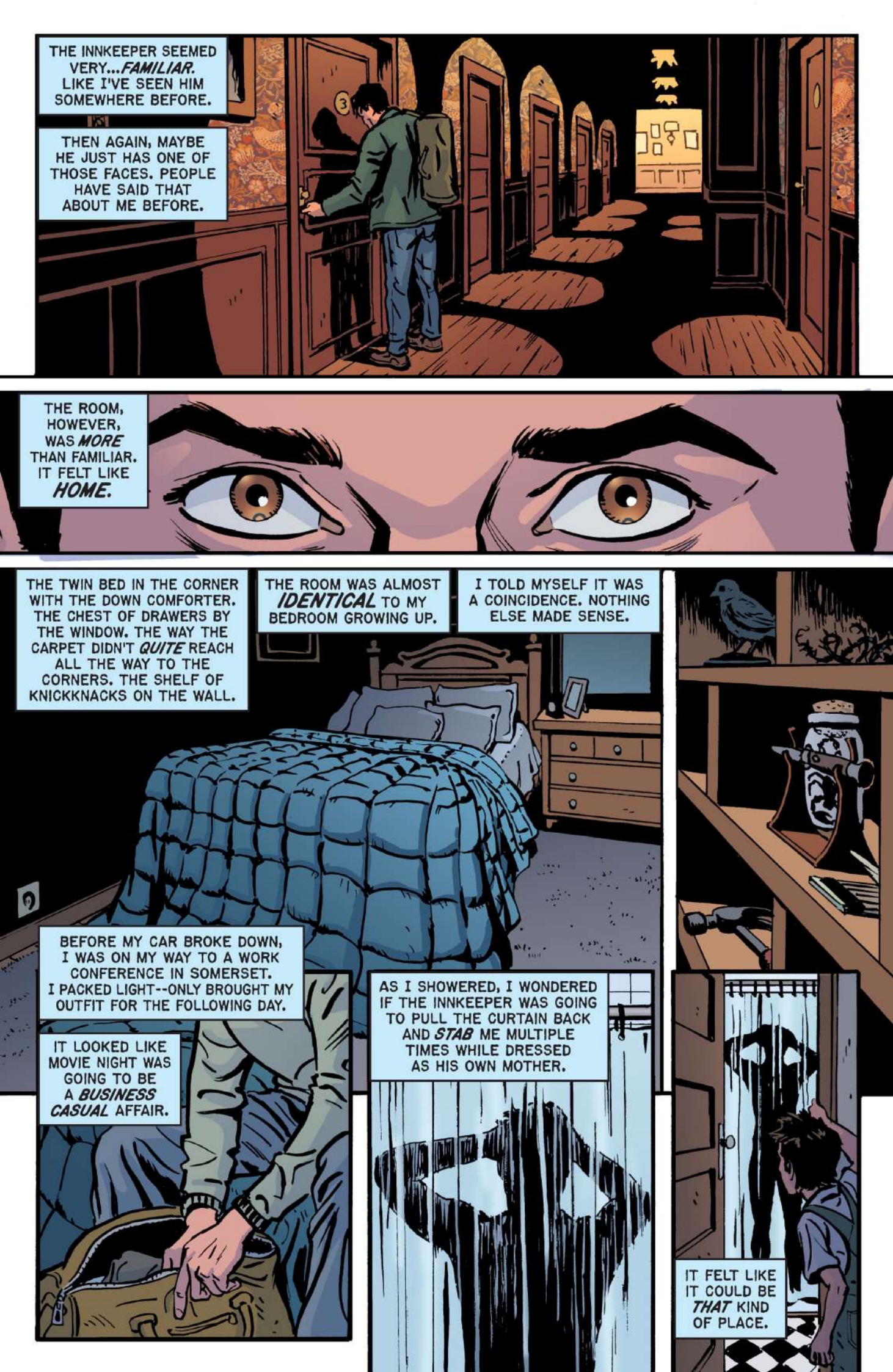

I COULD HEAR MY FATHER'S VOICE IN MY HEAD.
"IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT."
HE TOSSED OUT THAT UNFAILING GEM OF OPTIMISTIC FORTUNE-TELLING WHENEVER LIFE DECIDED MY PLANS WEREN'T GOOD ENOUGH.
FLYING OVER THE HANDLEBARS AT AGE EIGHT AND KNOCKING OUT THREE TEETH? "IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT."
LIVING OUT OF A HOTEL FOR MONTHS BECAUSE OUR HOUSE BURNED TO THE GROUND? "IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT."
SOMETHING AS INCONSEQUENTIAL AS CAR TROUBLE WOULD BARELY BE A BLIP ON THE RADAR, BUT IT WOULD STILL GET AN "IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT" FROM HIM.
NEED A DISTRACTION FROM THE HARSH REALITIES OF LIFE? WE'VE GOT JUST THE THING. JOIN US, IF YOU DARE, FOR... MOVIE NIGHT AT THE...
Marigold Inn
FUNNY THING IS, I ALWAYS BELIEVED HIM WHEN HE SAID IT.

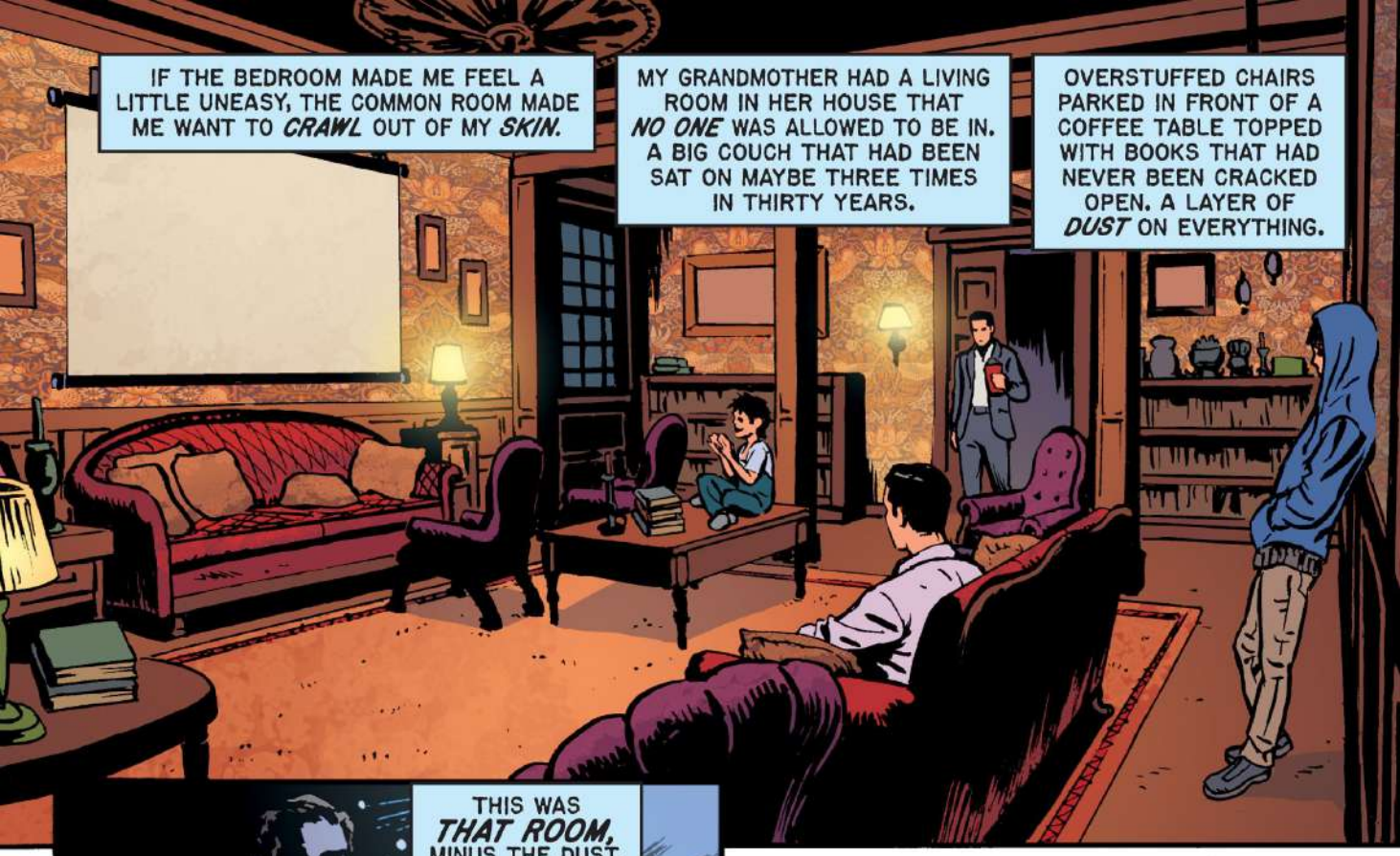
WELCOME TO THE MARIGOLD INN.
CHECKING IN?
MY, UH, CAR BROKE DOWN ABOUT A MILE DOWN THE STREET AND I SEEM TO HAVE LOST MY PHONE.
COULD I USE YOURS?
YOU...LOOK LIKE YOU COULD USE A KINDNESS OR TWO.
WE'VE GOT PLENTY OF *OPEN ROOMS* TONIGHT, SO WHY DON'T YOU TAKE ONE AND SHOWER AND GET YOURSELF WARMED UP WHILE I CALL YOU A TOW TRUCK?
THAT'S REALLY NICE OF YOU, BUT I CAN'T--
NO CHARGE.
AND I WON'T TAKE *"NO"* FOR AN ANSWER.
OKAY. I REALLY APPRECIATE IT.
DON'T THINK ON IT.
OH, AND WE'RE SHOWING A MOVIE TONIGHT.
ONCE YOU'RE SETTLED, COME DOWN TO THE COMMON ROOM. YOU CAN MEET SOME OF THE OTHER *GUESTS* AND CATCH A FLICK WHILE YOU WAIT FOR YOUR TOW.


THE INNKEEPER SEEMED VERY...*FAMILIAR.* LIKE I'VE SEEN HIM SOMEWHERE BEFORE.
THEN AGAIN, MAYBE HE JUST HAS ONE OF THOSE FACES. PEOPLE HAVE SAID THAT ABOUT ME BEFORE.
THE ROOM, HOWEVER, WAS *MORE* THAN FAMILIAR. IT FELT LIKE *HOME.*
THE TWIN BED IN THE CORNER WITH THE DOWN COMFORTER. THE CHEST OF DRAWERS BY THE WINDOW. THE WAY THE CARPET DIDN'T *QUITE* REACH ALL THE WAY TO THE CORNERS. THE SHELF OF KNICKKNACKS ON THE WALL.
THE ROOM WAS ALMOST *IDENTICAL* TO MY BEDROOM GROWING UP.
I TOLD MYSELF IT WAS A COINCIDENCE. NOTHING ELSE MADE SENSE.
BEFORE MY CAR BROKE DOWN, I WAS ON MY WAY TO A WORK CONFERENCE IN SOMERSET. I PACKED LIGHT--ONLY BROUGHT MY OUTFIT FOR THE FOLLOWING DAY.
IT LOOKED LIKE MOVIE NIGHT WAS GOING TO BE A *BUSINESS CASUAL* AFFAIR.
AS I SHOWERED, I WONDERED IF THE INNKEEPER WAS GOING TO PULL THE CURTAIN BACK AND *STAB* ME MULTIPLE TIMES WHILE DRESSED AS HIS OWN MOTHER.
IT FELT LIKE IT COULD BE *THAT* KIND OF PLACE.

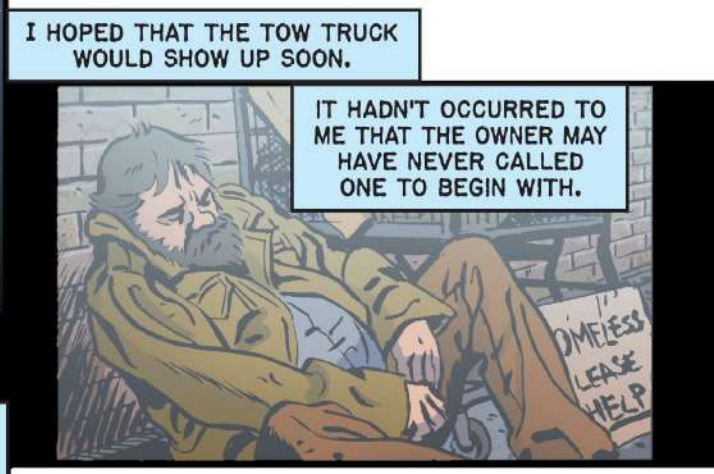
IT'S ALL I HAD WITH ME THAT ISN'T COMPLETELY *WATERLOGGED.*
I CAN RUN YOUR OTHER CLOTHES THROUGH THE DRYER WHILE THE MOVIE'S PLAYING.
WHAT ARE YOU SHOWING TONIGHT?

I HADN'T SEEN A POPCORN MACHINE LIKE THAT SINCE I WORKED AT THAT LITTLE INDIE MOVIE THEATER IN MY TWENTIES. IT BROUGHT BACK *MEMORIES.*

ALSO, HE REALLY SAID, *"IT'S A GAS."* I DIDN'T THINK PEOPLE EVEN SAID THAT ANYMORE. MAYBE HE'S BRINGING IT BACK.


IF THE BEDROOM MADE ME FEEL A LITTLE UNEASY, THE COMMON ROOM MADE ME WANT TO *CRAWL* OUT OF MY *SKIN*.
MY GRANDMOTHER HAD A LIVING ROOM IN HER HOUSE THAT *NO ONE* WAS ALLOWED TO BE IN. A BIG COUCH THAT HAD BEEN SAT ON MAYBE THREE TIMES IN THIRTY YEARS.
OVERSTUFFED CHAIRS PARKED IN FRONT OF A COFFEE TABLE TOPPED WITH BOOKS THAT HAD NEVER BEEN CRACKED OPEN. A LAYER OF *DUST* ON EVERYTHING.

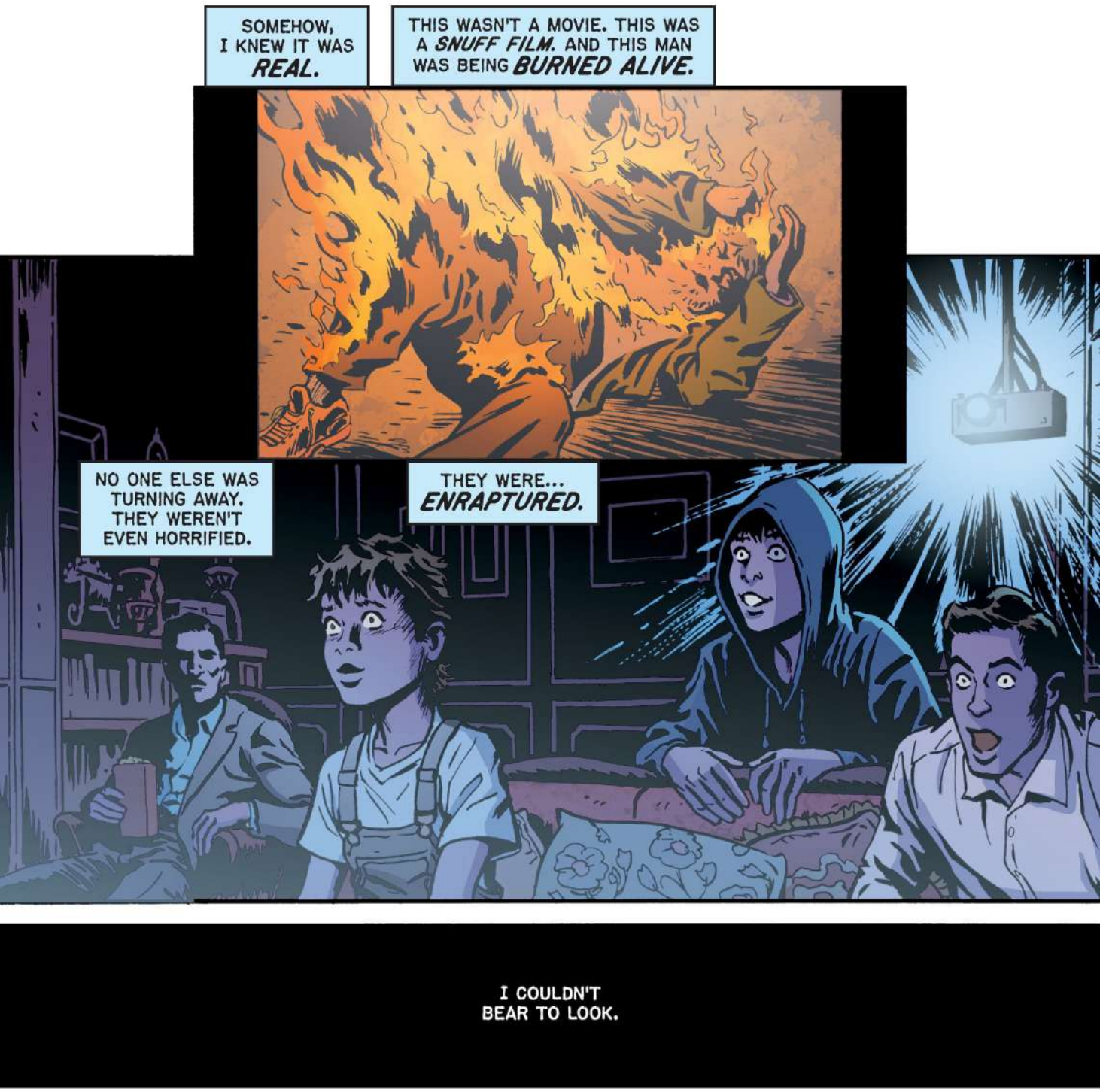
THIS WAS *THAT ROOM*, MINUS THE DUST.


I HOPED THAT THE TOW TRUCK WOULD SHOW UP SOON.
IT HADN'T OCCURRED TO ME THAT THE OWNER MAY HAVE NEVER CALLED ONE TO BEGIN WITH.
OMELESS
LEASE
HELP

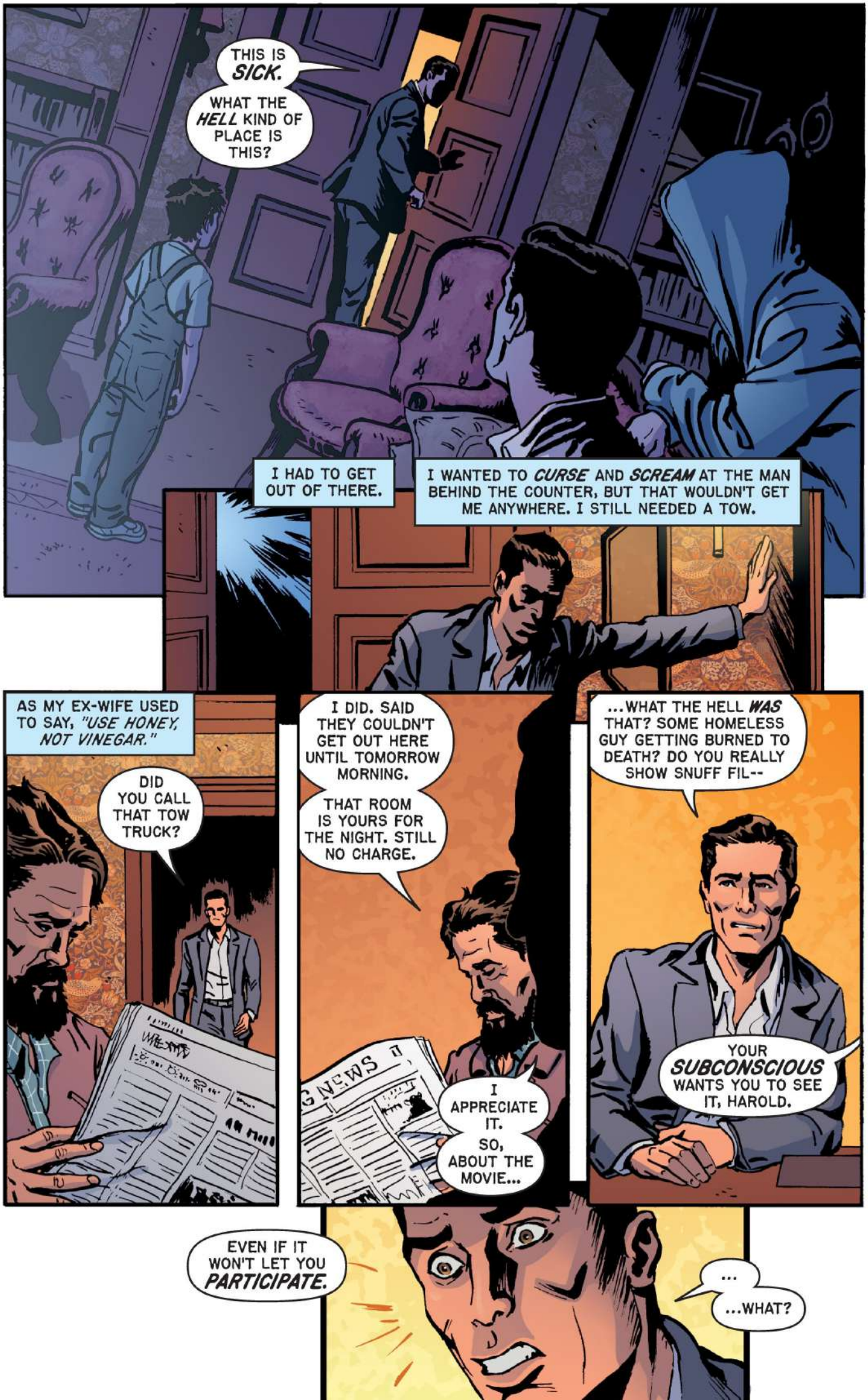
EVERYONE ELSE IN THE ROOM WAS *ENTHRALLED* BY THE MOVIE. I FELT LIKE I WAS MISSING SOMETHING.

AND THEN I SAW THE *GAS CAN*.

AND THE *LIGHTER*.
NO!


SOMEHOW, I KNEW IT WAS *REAL.*
THIS WASN'T A MOVIE. THIS WAS A *SNUFF FILM.* AND THIS MAN WAS BEING *BURNED ALIVE.*
NO ONE ELSE WAS TURNING AWAY. THEY WEREN'T EVEN HORRIFIED.
THEY WERE... *ENRAPTURED.*

I COULDN'T BEAR TO LOOK.


THIS IS SICK.
WHAT THE HELL KIND OF PLACE IS THIS?
I HAD TO GET OUT OF THERE.
I WANTED TO CURSE AND SCREAM AT THE MAN BEHIND THE COUNTER, BUT THAT WOULDN'T GET ME ANYWHERE. I STILL NEEDED A TOW.
AS MY EX-WIFE USED TO SAY, "USE HONEY, NOT VINEGAR."
DID YOU CALL THAT TOW TRUCK?
I DID. SAID THEY COULDN'T GET OUT HERE UNTIL TOMORROW MORNING.
THAT ROOM IS YOURS FOR THE NIGHT. STILL NO CHARGE.
I APPRECIATE IT.
SO, ABOUT THE MOVIE...
...WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT? SOME HOMELESS GUY GETTING BURNED TO DEATH? DO YOU REALLY SHOW SNUFF FIL--
YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS WANTS YOU TO SEE IT, HAROLD.
EVEN IF IT WON'T LET YOU PARTICIPATE.
...
...WHAT?

I IMAGINE IT'S SOME SORT OF GUILT RESPONSE. YOU TRY TO SAVE YOURSELF FROM THE PAIN OF IT BUT PART OF YOU WANTS TO BE PUNISHED ANYWAY.
WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY? THAT I'M MAKING ALL OF THIS UP?
NO.
YOU'RE JUST FOLLOWING THE PATH I MADE FOR YOU.
YOU'RE A BAD PERSON, SON. AND YOU DO BAD THINGS.
AND WHEN YOU DO THOSE BAD THINGS, A PART OF YOU COMES HERE. BECAUSE THAT PART OF YOU NEEDS TO.
I BUILT THIS PLACE SO THE GOOD PARTS OF YOU HAD SOMEWHERE TO GO.
A REFUGE FROM THE MAN YOU'VE BECOME.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
THE ONLY THING THAT'S REAL HERE IS WHAT YOU SAW ON THAT SCREEN.
YOU BURNED THAT MAN, HAROLD. YOU WATCHED HIM DIE.
ALL OF YOU WATCHED HIM DIE.

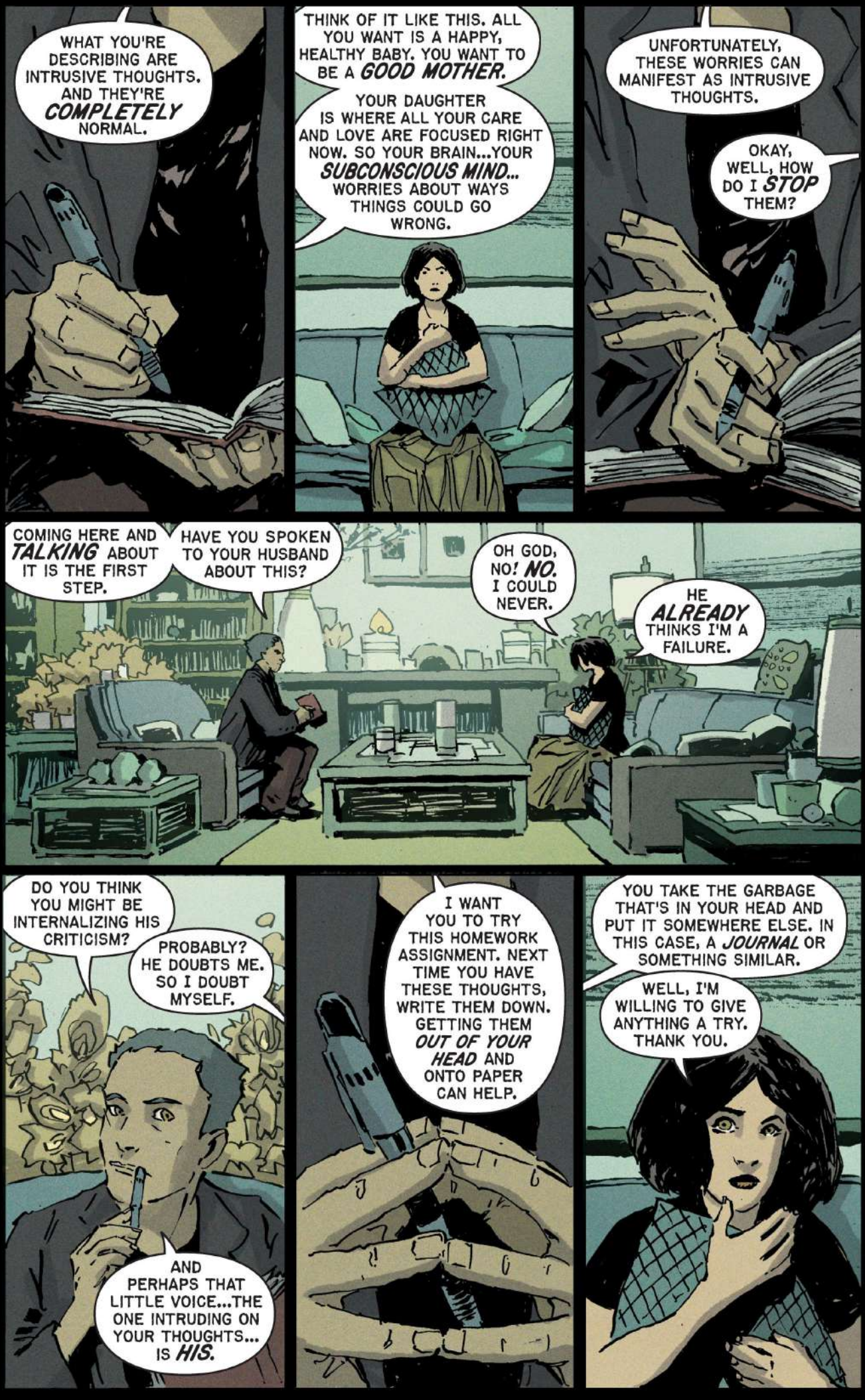
I STARTED MAKING *CONNECTIONS.*
PARTS OF THE INN WERE OBVIOUSLY FROM MY CHILDHOOD. MY GRANDMOTHER'S LIVING ROOM. THE BEDROOM WHERE I WENT EVERY TIME THE WORLD STOPPED MAKING SENSE.
MY CAR BROKE DOWN WHILE I WAS ON MY WAY TO A WORK CONFERENCE. BUT I COULDN'T REMEMBER WHAT MODEL MY CAR WAS OR WHAT KIND OF WORK I DID.
I DIDN'T REMEMBER DRIVING AT ALL. I JUST REMEMBERED STANDING OUTSIDE THE MARIGOLD INN AND *KNOWING* THAT I NEEDED TO GO INSIDE.
THE OTHER ONES HERE, THE OTHER PARTS OF ME-- WHAT HORRIBLE THINGS DID I DO AS A TEENAGER? AS A *KID?*
WHAT KIND OF *MONSTER* AM I?
EVEN THE INNKEEPER REMINDED ME OF SOMEONE. I DIDN'T REALIZE UNTIL THAT MOMENT THAT IT WAS MY *FATHER.*
HE SAID HE BUILT THIS PLACE FOR ME. WHAT DID THAT MEAN?
I GUESS I'LL HAVE TIME TO FIGURE THAT OUT.
HI, *UM*--IS THERE A ROOM AVAILABLE?

MY CRAPPY CAR HAS THE WORST TIMING IN THE WORLD.
OH GOD, WHAT DID I DO NOW?
WE'VE GOT A ROOM FOR YOU.
NUMBER SIX. HEAD ON UP AND MAKE YOURSELF NICE AND COMFORTABLE. I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN DO ABOUT THAT CAR OF YOURS.
THANKS. I REALLY APPRECIATE IT.
IT'S NEVER GOING TO END.
BUT I HAVE TO REMEMBER THAT FOR SOME OF THEM, IT'S JUST BEGINNING.
IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT.
WHAT DID YOU SAY?
I COULD HEAR MY FATHER'S VOICE IN MY HEAD...
...IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT.
POOR, PITIFUL HAROLD-- FOREVER STUCK INSIDE THE MARIGOLD INN WITH ALL THE PAIN HE'S CAUSED.
OOOH, I WONDER WHAT'S SHOWING NEXT?
THE END

AH, THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD. THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE HAVING A TINY MEATBAG THAT SHARES YOUR HIDEOUS FACE, EH?
NOW CRADLE YOUR LITTLE ONE TIGHT. TIGHTER. REALLY SQUEEZE...
AND ENJOY THIS TALE I CALL "INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS!"
IT'S LIKE THIS EVERY NIGHT. FRIENDS TRIED TO WARN ME BUT I THOUGHT IT'D BE DIFFERENT FOR ME. I'D BE THE PERFECT MOTHER. I'D LOVE EVERY MINUTE OF IT.
IT'S EASY TO BE OPTIMISTIC ON A FULL NIGHT'S SLEEP.
SHE'S CRYING AGAIN.
I KNOW...
I GOTTA BE UP AT SIX, FOR CHRISSAKES. TAKE CARE OF IT!
WE TRIED TO IGNORE HER CRIES AT FIRST. "SLEEP TRAINING," THEY CALL IT.
"DON'T COMFORT HER," THE EXPERTS SAY. "SHE'LL LEARN TO COMFORT HERSELF."
WWAAAHHH!
BUT WHO WAS GOING TO COMFORT ME? WHO WAS GOING TO HOLD ME AS HER CRIES PIERCED MY HEART?
SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE I HAVE TO CHOOSE--MY HUSBAND OR MY CHILD. I CAN'T MAKE EVERYONE HAPPY.
SHUT HER UP, ALREADY!
SHHH... SHHH... IT'S OKAY. MOMMY'S HERE.
WAAAHHH!
SHHH... PLEASE. PLEASE. FOR ME...
JUST ONE NIGHT OF SLEEP. PLEASE...

I LOVE HER WITH EVERY OUNCE OF MY BEING. BUT THE CRYING TEARS ME APART.
MAYBE IF I JUST PUT MY HAND OVER HER MOUTH...
MAYBE THEN I COULD SLEEP. MAYBE THEN HE'LL STOP YELLING AT ME.
JUST A LITTLE SQUEEZE...
SHHHHHH!
NO! NO! I LOVE YOU SO, SO MUCH. MORE THAN ANYTHING!
SHE'S MY WHOLE WORLD...
...SO WHY DO I KEEP THINKING ABOUT ENDING IT?

I GET THESE... THOUGHTS. THEY'RE LIKE HORRIBLE FLASHES IN MY BRAIN.
GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE.
LIKE, I'LL BE GIVING MY DAUGHTER A BATH. AND I'LL BE SO HAPPY WATCHING HER LAUGH AT THE BUBBLES. BUT THEN--
GOD, WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME??
IT'S OKAY. I'VE HEARD EVERYTHING. THERE'S NO JUDGMENT HERE.
EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE. GREAT, EVEN.
AND THEN MY BRAIN SUDDENLY SAYS, "JUST PUT HER UNDER. PUT HER HEAD UNDER."
IT'S LIKE IT'S NOT EVEN MY VOICE... IT'S NOT MY THOUGHT.
I THOUGHT IT'D COME NATURALLY, THIS MOTHERHOOD STUFF. AND I THOUGHT I'D HAVE HELP. BUT MY HUSBAND, HE'S OLD-FASHIONED...
MAYBE I WASN'T READY FOR A KID.
I'M SO AFRAID I'M GOING TO HURT HER. OR MYSELF...
YOU'RE HAVING SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?
NO, NO. BUT SOMETIMES I'LL JUST--I'LL BE STANDING ON THE STREET CORNER, WATCHING THE CARS-- AND I THINK...
WHAT IF I JUST TOOK A STEP?


WHAT YOU'RE DESCRIBING ARE INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS. AND THEY'RE COMPLETELY NORMAL.
THINK OF IT LIKE THIS. ALL YOU WANT IS A HAPPY, HEALTHY BABY. YOU WANT TO BE A GOOD MOTHER.
YOUR DAUGHTER IS WHERE ALL YOUR CARE AND LOVE ARE FOCUSED RIGHT NOW. SO YOUR BRAIN...YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND... WORRIES ABOUT WAYS THINGS COULD GO WRONG.
UNFORTUNATELY, THESE WORRIES CAN MANIFEST AS INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS.
OKAY, WELL, HOW DO I STOP THEM?
COMING HERE AND TALKING ABOUT IT IS THE FIRST STEP.
HAVE YOU SPOKEN TO YOUR HUSBAND ABOUT THIS?
OH GOD, NO! NO. I COULD NEVER.
HE ALREADY THINKS I'M A FAILURE.
DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE INTERNALIZING HIS CRITICISM?
PROBABLY? HE DOUBTS ME. SO I DOUBT MYSELF.
AND PERHAPS THAT LITTLE VOICE...THE ONE INTRUDING ON YOUR THOUGHTS... IS HIS.
I WANT YOU TO TRY THIS HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT. NEXT TIME YOU HAVE THESE THOUGHTS, WRITE THEM DOWN. GETTING THEM OUT OF YOUR HEAD AND ONTO PAPER CAN HELP.
YOU TAKE THE GARBAGE THAT'S IN YOUR HEAD AND PUT IT SOMEWHERE ELSE. IN THIS CASE, A JOURNAL OR SOMETHING SIMILAR.
WELL, I'M WILLING TO GIVE ANYTHING A TRY. THANK YOU.

FOR THE FIRST COUPLE OF WEEKS AFTER MY SESSION, EVERYTHING FELT LIGHTER.
WWAAAAAHHH!
I'M COMING! I'M COMING!
IT DIDN'T LAST.
WHAT IS IT NOW, HUH? WHAT DO YOU NEED?
OH. WOW.
SOMEONE NEEDS A DIAPER CHANGE.
SLAM
YOU HEAR THAT? DADDY'S HOME!
WWAAAHHH!

WHAT IS ALL THIS MESS?!
SORRY, SORRY! I GOT A LITTLE DISTRACTED WITH--
WHY THE HELL ISN'T DINNER READY?
IT'S ALMOST THERE. I JUST HAVE TO FINISH THIS.
YOU'RE HOME ALL GODDAMN DAY. HOW HARD IS IT TO HAVE FOOD ON THE TABLE?!
YOUR TIMING IS REALLY IMPECCABLE, KID. YOU'RE LUCKY YOU'RE CUTE--
--OTHERWISE I'D STUFF YOU IN THE OVEN WITH THAT POT ROAST AND BE FREE AGAIN.
NO! NOT AGAIN!

REMEMBER WHAT THE THERAPIST SAID. WRITE IT DOWN. GET IT OUT OF YOUR HEAD AND ONTO PAPER.
PUTTING BABY IN OVEN...
MY GODDAMN DINNER IS BURNING! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING IN HERE?
WHAT IS THIS??
NO! WAIT!
"I'M GOING TO DROWN THE BABY IN THE TUB. I'M GOING TO DROP THE BABY ON THE SIDEWALK..."
I CAN EXPLAIN!
"JUST DRIVE INTO THE TREE. NO ONE WILL MISS YOU."
I KNEW YOU WERE NO GOOD. WE SHOULD HAVE ABORTED THAT DAMN THING WHEN WE HAD THE CHANCE!
BUT NOW SHE'S HERE. AND IF YOU THINK I'M GOING TO LET YOU PUT YOUR STUPID, LAZY, INSANE HANDS ON HER...
PLEASE! PLEASE!